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ABSTRACT

The English Microlab Registry (EMR) was first designed as a database, or research tool, for planners of English microlabs in order to give them access to information about all aspects of microlab management. But EMR also provides descriptive data about what a microlab is and may well provide insight into whether those labs will survive. An analysis of the data accumulated in the registry reveals that while most computer labs dedicated to writing instruction are in English departments, a number of them do exist outside English departments as learning assistance centers or writing centers. Furthermore, the majority of labs are housed at universities and appear to be used most frequently for word processing in technical writing courses or for increasing efficiency in first-year courses. If the microlabs that currently exist are to survive and if new ones are to be sound investments, two conditions will have to be met: (1) college administrators and their colleagues must be committed to supporting microlab administrators, and (2) programs must be written specifically for the microlab environment. (DF)

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THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT MICROLAB: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?

An article in the April, 1985 issue of Science magazine quoted researchers as estimating that over the next 10 years large universities may spend between \$100 and \$200 million apiece for "computers and related technologies." Researchers further estimate, the article continues, that over the same time period small universities may spend between \$20 and \$30 million on similar conversions.¹ Evidence from the English Microlab Registry, (EMR) a database of information about computer facilities for writing instruction, suggests that English departments will share in that conversion, that instructional computing--mostly in the form of word processing equipment for students--will gobble up a larger and larger slice of the budget pie. As editor of the EMR, I have seen the number of microlabs in the listing rise in the past year from 41 to 65: a dramatic increase. Many English departments are providing computers for their students; yet, when you consider the fact that many students now have their own computers, there is cause for serious alarm.

I heard an English professor at a 4C's conference express that alarm in this way: "If our students are all going to own their own computers, why are we investing in word processing labs at all?" Why invest thousands (or millions) of dollars in computer equipment when students will soon be doing their word processing in their dorm rooms? The issue is complicated by an understandable urge to provide students with the benefits of writing technology. But the stakes are high. Put another way the issue is this: is the current rage for microlabs a part of a

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new and productive role of computers, or is it a waste of money. Faced as many of us are with the prospect of lean budgets, are may be offering the technology of writing to those who already have it.

As a director of a microlab in the English Department at Texas Tech University for the last 3 years, I have a professional interest in the issue. I would like to see articles, books, and conference sessions devoted to microlabs. But how much more crucial is the interest of those administrators who are planning their facility now? Like me 3 years ago, many of them are starting from scratch, sending out letters and making phone calls. The EMR was first designed as a research tool for those planners. It was intended to give them access to information about all aspects of microlab management, from types of word processing programs to types of computers. But I have realized that the information it contains may be useful as primary data, relevant to the issue of microlab survival. The EMR, in fact, provides us with the first real descriptive data about what a microlab is.² It may also provide us with insight into whether those labs will survive.

What kinds of information does the EMR contain? Apart from names and addresses, the registration form asks for the name of the facility, the date it started, and the number of user hours it offers (user hours means the total number of terminals multiplied by the total number of hours the lab is open per week.) The starting date is intended to give researchers an idea of the degree of experience the contact(s) might have with microlab management; and the number of user hours is intended to give an idea of the lab's size. Three other types of information are requested on the registration form: a description of the hardware (specifically the brands and numbers of computers and printers); a list of the software (specifically word processing programs and courseware); and, finally, a brief statement (under 50 words) of

the facility's purpose. Included with this information is a computer-generated index to brand names of programs and equipment.

The index makes it easy for researchers to identify those facilities which use any given brand of computer or computer program. All this information is entered into my home computer and printed out for distribution twice a year.³

The description of a microlab on the registration form is as follows: microlabs are "microcomputer facilities in language-related departments (English, Rhetoric, Communications, Speech, ESL, etc.) in colleges and universities." However, the term microlab is likely to mean different things to different people. To some, a microlab means a computer classroom, to others it means a walk-in room, and to others it means a computer in the corner of a writing center. Some see its users primarily as faculty or graduate students, others see its users as primarily students who were assigned a "lab" by their teachers. Some see it as a word processing center, some see it as a drill and practice center. Some want to teach in it, some want to research in it. To try to get a handle on this diversity I studied the names people gave for their labs. Names like The English Department Word Processing Lab (California University of Pennsylvania) or The English Computer Writing Lab (University of Minnesota, Duluth) specify the purest of the breed: the dedicated lab in the English department. Dedicated word processing/grammar labs make up 83% of the EMR listings. Typically these labs house approximately 12-15 non-networked, stand-alone IBM PC's or Apples. They offer word processing and some computer-assisted instruction. The "average" lab offers about 500 user hours per week -- enough time to computerize about 8-10 composition classes (at 2 hours per student per week).

While most computer labs dedicated to writing instruction are in English departments, a significant number of them exist outside English departments, either as learning assistance centers

or writing centers. These facilities include the Writing Skills Center (Texas A & I University) and the Purdue University Writing Center. Only 7% of the labs registered are writing centers. Certain other names -- the Learning Center Instructional Laboratory (Evergreen Valley College), or the Microlab of the Individualized Learning Center (Florida Institute of Technology) -- suggest facilities with a university-wide clientele. About 9% of the facilities in the EMR are learning assistance centers. The older labs in the EMR (1979-1982) are writing centers and learning assistance centers: instructional facilities already in place.

Another indicator of the nature and use of a microlab is the type of institution that houses it: whether it be a state college, a college, or a university. One thing the EMR lets us do is search the database for words like "state" or "community" in the "name of school" field. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Percent of Microlabs in the EMR by
Type of Institution

Universities	44%
Colleges	23%
State Universities	16%
Community Colleges	09%
Institutes and High Schools	09%

Clearly these numbers indicate, on the one hand, that perhaps certain types of institutions (universities) were encouraged to register, or were contacted and asked to register. Because I give out EMR registration forms at conferences, these figures may reflect the conference-going behavior of our university colleagues. On the other hand, one may read these figures in other ways. The high percentage of facilities in universities may

suggest that these labs serve research purposes. That so many of them are in colleges and state universities may suggest that many English teachers in training are beginning to explore computer usages. Their expertise may shape microlabs and writing instruction to come.

The terminology of certain parts of the EMR records, the "statement of purpose" field, suggested also to me that research represented a common secondary use of microcomputers in English (the primary use being writing instruction). To study the terminology used in the statements of purpose, I did a computerized analysis of the frequency of word use in them. I was able to list the words in the purpose statements according to the number of times they were used. The analysis showed that the word "research" was used 14 times. The word use frequency of other key words is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency of selected key words
used in Purpose Statements in the EMR
(total number of purpose statements = 65)

Word or words*	Number of occurrences
business, communications	5
technical, grammar, reading	
revising, language	6
freshman	7
basic, learning	8
cai, teaching	9
classes	10
student	13
research	14
composition	16
instruction	17
courses	19

faculty	20
english	23
word	40
students	58
writing	75

*Prepositions, articles, auxilliary verbs, etc. are omitted from this list.

It is important, I think, to qualify any discussion of these figures by realizing that these purpose statements -- responses to the query: "Brief statement of the facility's purpose (50 words; may be edited for length; use attachments if needed):" -- may simply represent wishful thinking on the part of microlab directors. (I might inject that none of the purpose statements was edited.) They may not accurately reflect the day-to-day usage of the facility. They may be outdated. Yet, clearly from Table 2 we can see that many descriptions are cast in terms of the specific instructional use, such as technical or business writing, (11 labs total) or in terms of the level of application, such as "freshman" or "basic". Two uses of word processing seem to be most appealing: 1) the practical value of instruction in word processing in technical writing courses; and 2) the promise of greater efficiency in first-year courses. Untested, experimental, or recently published uses are not showing up yet with regularity. And as the computer technology gets more powerful, networked labs using the Writer's Workbench or the Automated Language Processing Systems (ALPS) software are registering more frequently.

This descriptive information about microlabs suggests that they are not just word processing centers. They are facilities with multiple uses. I would like to think that the future of these labs would depend on their well-tested instructional validity. I would like to think the need for computers in writing

instruction and research would be recognized by all (or forgotten by all as the case may be). If student interest and use were the criteria then there would be no issue: students love microlabs. But the longevity of these facilities also depends on non-theoretical, often lower-order considerations of money and politics. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that for the microlabs that currently exist to survive, and for new ones to represent sound investments, two conditions must be met: 1) college administrators and colleagues to commit to supporting microlab administrators; and 2) programs need to be written specifically for the microlab environment.

The first condition is the more easily met. As microlabs grow in size and complexity, some person will need to emerge with the expertise to manage information and personnel. The future microlab director may be a research management specialist, adept at satisfying the information needs of what we now call instruction and research. Following the model of data processing departments in government and business, this individual might be in charge of program development, documentation, and computer system maintenance. Certainly he or she would be a central facilitator of information exchange and retrieval. As research and instructional computing "heat up" our colleagues as well may welcome the help of an informed microlab director. Establishing these and other traces of administrative support, such as reduced teaching loads and higher pay, would help protect and validate the investment in computer technology now sweeping English departments.

Similarly, these facilities, like others in medium to large organizations, need to have programs that suit the needs of their primary users: students and teachers. I might even offer this theory: if software developers write programs for microlabs there will be microlabs to run them in. The point here is that microlabs offer a unique environment for computers and research in

writing. For instance, we are beginning to see networking make a significant mark on writing instruction as more and more writing teachers recognize the extended audience and flexibility in authorship that computers provide. They also see that microlabs encourage collaborative writing and in some ways challenge our traditional considerations of rhetoric and purpose. Other issues concerning microlabs have yet to be answered: How will copy-protection be handled? How will we measure the pedagogical validity of lab-style teaching? What does ease-of-use mean in a microlab?

Clearly, microlabs are here, but are they here to stay? As we have seen, microlabs are beginning to do more than offer word processing. They appeal to multiple levels and multiple types of instruction. Microlabs provide a focus point for research at all levels. For me to pretend to answer to the question raised in the beginning of this article would not make much sense, nor be believable. The emerging technology of writing is on-going and dynamic, and promises to be so for years to come. If, as I have suggested, we support microlab directors, and if we take advantage of the opportunity for research that microlabs offer then there is a good chance we may look forward to the First National Conference on the Theory and Management of Word Processing Microlabs. See you there.

NOTES

- ¹ Waldrop, M. M. "Personal Computers on Campus." Science, 228: 4698 (April 26, 1985), 438-444.
- ² I know of two projects that are studying computer facilities as a part of analyzing computer use in general. One project is being conducted by Linda J. Stine in the Master of Human Service Program at Lincoln University, Lincoln, Nebraska. Stine's work will be presented at the November, 1985 NCTE Conference in Philadelphia. The other study is being conducted by R. M. B. Gardiner and Jo K. McGinnis at the English Department of the University of Arizona at Tucson. Both these studies promise descriptive information about microlabs.
- ³ Anyone wishing further information about the EMR may write me at 1211 47th Street, Lubbock, TX 79412.

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